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Early Island Conventions

CONSIDERABLE CONTROVERSY HAS erupted in recent years over the question of Honolulu's need for a convention center (maybe two), possible locations, height limitations, and related issues. But the Islands are not strangers to the luring, care, and feeding of conventions, conferences, professional meetings, and kindred types of gatherings. These meetings go back at least 170 years. Perhaps even to precontact times. The ancient Hawaiians sometimes assembled in groups not too dissimilar from today's conferences.

The earliest convention in the modern sense, involving a written agenda, delegates, and published proceedings, appears to have been the 1823 General Meeting of the Sandwich Islands Mission, held in the Mission House on King Street on February 28. All of three delegates met, formally founded the organization, and elected a fourth to membership. The handwritten financial report presented at the meeting reported the purchase of

5 galls wine, \$15
2 do Rum, \$4,
2 do Brandy, \$6

These items presumably were consumed during the course of a year and not all at a postsession happy hour.¹

Similar General Meetings of the Sandwich Islands Mission took

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place at more or less regular intervals for many years, each session bigger than its predecessor. The 1826 session, held at Kailua, Kona, attracted five delegates; the 1828 meeting, on O'ahu, had eight; in Lahaina, in 1833, seventeen persons were present; and by 1848, when the General Meeting was convened at the native school house in Honolulu, fully thirty-seven attended.²

Most of the Island conventions held in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were limited to Hawai'i-based groups, with delegates traveling by interisland schooners or steamers. Examples included the annual mission meetings referred to above and the annual Civic Conventions first held in Hilo in 1912 and Honolulu in 1913.³

By 1910, however, convention promoters were beginning to look to mainland organizations, both for their annual meetings and for postconvention tours. The Hawaii Promotion Committee, the forerunner of the Hawaii Visitors Bureau founded in 1903, from its beginning actively solicited such business.⁴ From 1930 to 1939, the Chamber of Commerce of Honolulu operated a Conventions Department, which helped to attract a number of national conventions to Hawai'i.⁵

During the 1920s and 1930s, Hawai'i hosted many major conferences with international scope. The first of these international conferences was the Pan-Pacific Scientific Congress, during which 103 delegates (some accounts say 94 or 96) from eight nations, plus forty observers from Hawai'i, convened at 'Iolani Palace and other locations, August 2–20, 1920. Some 138 papers were read at the scientific sessions. There were also many social events held in conjunction with the Congress—a smoker at the University Club, a Tantalus excursion, a reception, a banquet at the Moana Hotel, a lu'au and hulas at the Country Club, and Neighbor Island tours. This auspicious beginning was soon followed by the Pan-Pacific Educational Conference in August 1921, the Press Congress of the World in October 1921, and many others.⁶

It was not until 1955, however, that Hawai'i managed to attract a convention with attendance reaching into the thousands. This conference, the first of such magnitude in Island history, was the 58th General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church, held at Iolani School, September 4–15, 1955. When the Right Reverend

Henry Knox Sherrill opened the convention before sixty-five hundred attendees at Civic Auditorium (better known at the time as a venue for wrestling matches), it was described as "the largest group of people ever assembled under one roof in Honolulu." The final estimate of convention attendance was four thousand, including fifteen hundred official delegates.⁷ Interestingly, the overall total was exactly one thousand times the figure for Honolulu's first convention, likewise a religious meeting, held just 132 years earlier.

NOTES

- ¹ *Extracts from the Records of the Hawaiian Association, from 1823 to 1836* (Honolulu: Mission Press, 1837) 3-4; HMCS file, "General Meeting, 1823, Sandwich Islands Mission Collection."
- ² *Extracts . . . 1823 to 1836* 4, 9-10; *Extracts from the Minutes of the General Meeting of the Sandwich Islands Mission, Held at Honolulu, May and June, 1848* (Oahu: American Mission Press, 1848) 3.
- ³ *HAA* 1913:182-83; *HAA* 1914:212; "Islands United Again," *PP* Nov. 1913:7-8.
- ⁴ "Hawaii in the Limelight," *PCA* 5 Oct. 1908:1; Geo. F. Henshall, "Promotion in Hawaii," *The Mid-Pacific Magazine* Jan. 1914:43; John Hodges, "The Tourist Situation in Hawaii," *PP* Jan. 1920:12-14.
- ⁵ Clarence L. Hodge and Peggy Ferris, *Building Honolulu* (Honolulu: Chamber of Commerce of Honolulu, 1950) 46-47.
- ⁶ "Pan-Pacific Scientific Congress," *PP* Aug. 1920:9; "Pan-Pacific Conference," *HAA* 1921:45-53; Paul F. Hooper, *Elusive Destiny: The Internationalist Movement in Modern Hawaii* (Honolulu: UP of Hawaii, 1980) 88-90; Frank F. Bunker, "The Pan-Pacific Educational Conference," *HAA* 1922:72-81; "Aloha! Press Congress, Aloha!," *HAA* 1922:130-39; "Press Congress Convention," *HAA* 1922:139-51.
- ⁷ "Hawaii Hosts Its Largest Convention in Island History!," *PP* Sept. 1955:18; Lois Stewart, "Episcopalian Convention Opens at Auditorium," *HA* 5 Sept. 1955:A1; "4,000 Were Here for Church Meet," *HSB* 29 Sept. 1955:7.

